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ABSTRACT
This poetry assignment for college freshmen involved preparing a paper. Reading of an Unterecker essay on poetry, extensive reading in a chosen poet, study of criticism, and organization of the paper are discussed. Excerpts from the results are included. Results are discussed in relation to the appreciation of poetry and composition skills. (AF)

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The Library Paper and the Leap

IDA FASEL

THIS YEAR I DECIDED to force the student to make a leap from the raw materials of the library to an informed opinion. I wanted to see his own thinking powers operating on his sources, his mind stirred to excitement or disquiet by his experiences. I found the subject (as one often finds the unexpected resource) quite simply in what was at hand: in an essay in our reader, "Poetry for the Practical Man" by John Unterecker (*Using Prose*, edited by Donald W. Lee and William T. Moynihan, New York, 1961).

The first step entailed a close reading of Unterecker. Students find it hard to read closely. They are quick to respond with "I don't agree." They can discourse eloquently and ardently on how wrong a writer is. But they are often fuzzy as to what he actually said.

Unterecker's essay is a spirited and immensely provocative comment on the state of poetry (principally) in our society. Appealing directly to the "practical man" in a commercial jargon presumably intended to put the obviously learned author on a familiar level with the man in the street, Unterecker proposes poetry as a means of finding order in a disordered world. He suggests that the practical man begin preferably with a Collected Works and go the critic for ancillary help only after becoming "fairly well acquainted" with the author in his chronological development. Unterecker further suggests that the practical man live with the poems, giving them a chance to work. Finally, arguing from an aesthetics of form, Unterecker urges that the poem "be approached as a work of art, a structured thing, a shape." The message is important, but the "organized thing that a poem is" is more so.

The next consideration was the problem. Would Unterecker work? The students were to make themselves guinea pigs. They were to test the proposals and assess the value of his thesis *for them*. They could not catalog Keats' poetry or Shakespeare's sources. They could not write a biography of Shelley or a history of Victorian poetry. They had to write a 6-10 page opinion-report, with appropriate documentation, on the effectiveness of Unterecker's suggestions. If a student didn't like poetry, if he were one of Unterecker's "practical men," so much the better. He was the very one the essay was intended for.

How much of the poetry was a student expected to read? A Collected Works in some cases would be extensive, less of a problem, to be sure, in modern writers severely selective or in such poets as Keats, whose short life prevented a prolific output. A Collected Works of even a small size would take a much longer time to live with than the due date of the paper allowed. I granted that the student had to be selective; I felt that if he read judiciously poems written at different periods in the poet's life and sampled in depth some of the poems critically recognized as the poet's best, he would have a sufficient qualitative basis for intelligent evaluation.

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Many of the students bought inexpensive paperback selections of an author's work. These they read over lunches, in the bus, between classes. But where did the research come in? What were they to look for in the library? My answer was, of course, the critics. The students were to read what the critics had to say about poetry in general and about the poems of their chosen poets in particular. I reminded the students that many of the notes they took would not be usable. If they made a desk or a dress, materials beyond the requirements of the pattern would have to be diverted to other uses or discarded. Thus, how Keats' father earned a living, whether Keats was married to Fannie or not,—such bits of information and conjecture which might find their way into notes were actually irrelevant to the paper but might serve for interim, impromptu themes.

A new difficulty appeared at outline time. Organization is not a strong point with freshmen, and the longer the paper, the more apparent the perplexity. Bibliography and note cards behind them, how were they to put their research together? How were they to tie in Keats, let us say, with Unterecker's proposals? This was of course the whole point of the assignment. I decided on personal conferences to discuss the organization of the material individually, to condition each student's mind to making the leap from material to meaning. One student reduced Frost's poetry to half a dozen aspects including his mechanical form of verse, his exact descriptions, and his stable themes growing out of rural background. The sense of order arrived at by this analysis led the student to agree with Unterecker. Most students chose the obvious inductive approach, proceeding systematically with what happened as they progressed from the first suggestion to the next, and thence to the last.

I had hoped in this type of paper to avoid the innocent but direct copying that is particularly evident in the undergraduate library paper, for example:

> By the discipline of art the poet achieves that inevitable rhyming whose charm is irrestible to the listening ear.

How refreshing, by contrast, was this blunt solid statement from a student really grappling with the problem:

> I found that if I would read a poem, close the book, and ponder the sonnet or a verse for a few moments, then read the same sonnet or verse over again, I would derive a great deal of meaning and satisfaction. I also found that if I read for pure pleasure instead of trying to grasp a hidden emotion or message I would actually enjoy the verse. The less I tried to analyze it and the more often I read a poem simply because of the gratification it gave me, the more I found myself disregarding the reading simply as part of an assignment and to my surprise, I found that it had become a source of relaxation and pleasure.

He hastened to assure the reader: "I do not want anyone to think that I literally changed overnight because I did not." But his chosen poet was Michelangelo, and he admitted some modification of his old self after reading him.

Unterecker's rebuke for the "anthology of poetry in the guest room" brought this light-hearted response:

> Why should the book of poems come out of the guest room? The guest is probably the only one in the whole house that has the extra time to spend on reading poetry and trying to understand it, that is, if he is planning to stay long enough.

Another took the reprimand personally:

> I felt that the message was directed to me as that same anthology was in my guest room. Poetry was always something that I was going to get around to reading; however, subconsciously I must have meticulously avoided doing just that, as until a few weeks ago my association with poetry was almost non-existent.

One of the papers made this good point:

It is almost impossible for anyone who has had no experience with poetry to go straight to a difficult poet, such as Dylan Thomas, and get anything out of his diction and imagery without benefit of an explanation. Had this paper not been an assignment, Unterecker would have lost and failed at this point. This is where the critics aided in selling poetry to me. They provided the key that unlocked the door to comprehension and enjoyment.

Another expressed the same idea with an analogy.

If a person who has never seen a basketball game or knows nothing of the rules sees a game, the chances are he will not enjoy the game or be very interested in the game either. He will not enjoy the game until he learns something of the rules. The same holds true of poetry.

One student, our discussion of logic fresh in mind, became somewhat involved in a definition of terms:

Poetry is not for the perfectly practical man, but rather for the man who enjoys poetry. For who can say or give a definition of a perfectly practical man, since the term is abstract? What kind of poetry is for the practical man? I am sure that no poet wrote any poems for the perfectly practical man.

One or two never came to grips with any aspect of the problem, never made the leap at all. However, the range of grades compared with the range of grades for themes or for more conventional types of term papers. I feel quite satisfied that the several purposes of the project were served and that as a result the students can go on to the next paper with more confidence and care. As for poetry itself, whether the experiment was from this point of view an ordeal or an enlightening experience, I am certain that the students to whom this report is both a dedication and an acknowledgment of indebtedness will never look at poetry the same way again.

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